Suburban Tipping Point
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There is much about Election 2006 that is familiar and predictable. As a mid-term election, it fits many of the patterns long observed in American politics. Most noteworthy: mid-term elections during a second term normally spell trouble for the incumbent party, and trouble seems likely to occur this year.

Many conditions can contribute to the ruling party's woes in mid-terms; voters are weary with incumbents, the effects of policy disappointments accumulate and economic unease often emerges. This year's mid-term election fits into that historic pattern, albeit aggravated by the incumbent Bush's low approval ratings and the continuation of an unpopular war in Iraq.

Election 2006; however, mixes the familiar with some newer forces and factors that make this mid-term different than most of its predecessors. This year is best compared to 1994, the last mid-term in which a party shift occurred in Congress, with the Republicans gaining control of both Houses of Congress. They did so by making gains in the South, while holding onto the rural and suburban parts of the Midwest and Northeast.

But twelve years later, another epic congressional showdown looms and the political geography has changed markedly. Now the battle ground is not in the South or even mostly in the Midwest, but in the suburbs of the blue states of the Northeast. And Pennsylvania is one of those battleground states.

For Pennsylvania, this is an old role in a new play. The state has typically been viewed as a presidential bellwether state, since the presidential elections beginning with JFK in 1960 through Kerry in 2004. In fact, in 2004 the state was the sixth most competitive presidential state in the nation.

But for the first time in recent history, it is now a congressional battleground, hosting three, and possibly four of the truly competitive US House races in the nation. House control might well hinge on the outcomes of these contests. Only 15 seats nationally have to shift from Republican to Democratic control.

Three of the four competitive seats are in the Philadelphia suburbs--the sixth, seventh, and eighth congressional districts--and they are being vigorously contested. More than 16 million dollars of ad money has been reserved for the campaigns' final weeks.

Two of the contested seats are in districts once considered safe for the GOP. In both of these suburban districts, the 7th represented by Curt Weldon and the 8th by Mike Fitzpatrick, it is the President's low job approval and popularity that has precipitated the serious challenges to incumbents. Ironically it was Bush's earlier popularity and work for Republicans that helped increase his party's House majority in Congress from 221 when he was first elected to 232 at the start of his second term.

Neither the 7th District nor the 8th District seats have been vulnerable in the past. The same can not be said for the third GOP suburban seat now in play. In the Pennsylvania 6th Congressional District, two-term incumbent Jim Gerlach has narrowly won his last two elections, in a district created in a Republican gerrymander in 2001 that made the district very competitive.
The causes of Republican angst in the suburbs are multiple and long standing. They go far beyond anti-Bush sentiment or even opposition to the Iraq war; the GOP's more fundamental problems in the suburbs encompass trends almost two decades old.

In particular three long term political transitions now threaten the traditional hegemony Republicans have had in the Philadelphia suburbs; these transformations could limit statewide two-party competitions in future years and might well now play a similar role in national politics. They are:

- **Voter Volatility And Independence** - Democrats have been steadily gaining party registrants, but increasingly party registration--either Republican or Democrat--is irrelevant to voting. Suburban voters increasingly think of themselves as independents, despite nominal party registration. A major consequence is a widespread and growing tendency to engage in ticket-splitting, with Republicans voting for Democrats for many state and local offices.

- **Voter Ideological Shifts** - Suburban voters are simply more moderate on the great social questions of the day, especially on abortion, gay marriage, gun control, and the federal funding of stem cell research. Still fiscally conservative on many spending issues, they have grown restive in a party often dominated by social conservatives and increasingly likely to support moderate Democrats. Many of these voters are college-educated women who have led the exodus.

- **Shifting Party Dominance** - The vaunted Republican political organizations in the four suburban Philadelphia counties have been losing ground in a slow but consistent process for more than a decade. Democrats have controlled the city of Philadelphia since the 1950's but now they are making headway in winning offices or even control in municipalities adjacent or nearby to the City of Philadelphia. Suburban voters, many of whose parents or grandparents adopted the Republican Party when they fled the city, are now willing to vote for Democrats--some for the first time. They are boosted by in-migration from new voters, many of whom are employed in the high tech, healthcare, and financial institutions that have less allegiance to the Republican Party. These newer voters have higher income and education levels, and fit the profile of voters Democrats have captured in recent years.

So, Pennsylvania Republicans are facing some substantial short term and long term problems. Short term, it is Bush and his policies that are eroding support; longer term, there is an ongoing shift of partisan alignment in the suburbs that well might purport seismic changes in the politics of Pennsylvania.

For the GOP, a defining moment seems at hand. Democrats have been investing long term in the suburbs and this year they are threatening to cash in their chips. For Republicans it couldn't happen at a worst time. The long term trends favoring Democrats have been steady but by degree. Now Bush's anemic popularity in the suburbs and the situation in Iraq may prove to be the tipping point that turns the suburbs decisively to the Democrats. If so, the GOP this fall may be perched on the edge of a political abyss that could transform both state and national politics for the next generation.

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